

Q & A: Emre Erdogan, Infakto Research Workshop

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Dr. Erdogan is a founding partner of Infakto Research Workshop in Istanbul and a member of ARI Movement, an independent research and educational organization. He spoke with WPO via email.

In the latest Pew Global Attitudes poll, more than four out of five Turks (83%) express unfavorable views of the United States . That's the second highest percentage (after the Palestinians) among the 10 Muslim nations polled. It's also a large increase from the modest majority that expressed a negative view prior to the invasion of Iraq in 2002 (54%). What explains this change?

This sudden and rapid decrease in positive attitudes towards the US is an outcome of the invasion. [...] Several surveys show that Turks are against the invasion of Iraq because they think that this invasion led to increasing terrorist threats towards Turkey. Turkey has experienced an enduring internal struggle with the separatist PKK and before the invasion of Iraq, this terrorist organization was almost pacified. However, the [overthrow] of the political regime of Saddam resulted in increasing terrorist and political activity of the PKK, under indirect supervision of the Northern Iraq Administration and the US.

Consequently, Turkish citizens associate increased terrorist activity with the opportunity space provided to them after the invasion and perceive the US as responsible for the worsening situation.

The Turkish public (64%) names the United States as the country that poses the greatest threat to their own country in the future. Why would a fellow NATO ally feel so threatened?

The Turkish public perceives the US as the worst enemy of Turkey as a result of intensifying terrorist activities of the PKK in the Southeastern region of the country. The collaboration of the US with the PKK is much more than an urban legend and Turkish media continuously present evidence for this collaboration.

Consequently, this intolerance and antipathy towards the PKK [encouraged] the perception of the US as the major enemy of the country. Before the invasion of Iraq, the

worst enemy of the country was stated as Greece or Armenia which are eternal enemies of Turkey, rather than the US.

Many publics have a more favorable view of Americans than of the United States. But three out of four Turks also view Americans negatively (77%). Again this is a big increase over 2002 (up 27 points) and it's the largest percentage with this attitude among the majority Muslim publics polled by Pew. These numbers are especially surprising given Turkey's history as a secular democracy and its close ties with the West. Many publics dislike US policies, but why have Turks become so sharply negative toward US society and culture in the last five years? Is this a rejection of US values or part of a wider rejection of Western values?

Before the Iraq war, the negative reaction towards the US was limited and other dimensions of the US such as Americans or the American culture were generally appreciated. However, as a result of enduring terrorist activities of the PKK associated with the US invasion of Iraq and the failure of establishing a coherent mechanism to prevent these activities, Turkish antipathy towards the US government has been transferred to an emerging antipathy towards the Americans and the US life style. Our previous research presented that the climate of the Turkish public opinion was “anti-Bushism” rather than “anti-Americanism”. Nevertheless, recent findings indicate a change of the climate towards anti-Americanism.

We cannot evaluate negative attitudes as a rejection of Western values. Although different surveys show that Turkish citizens are suspicious about the virtues of democracy, this reaction is a result of underperforming governance of the country during the 1990s.

In contrast to their increasingly negative views of the United States, Turks have become much more positive about their own government. Six in ten Turks (61%) currently have a favorable view, up from 7% five years ago. How do you explain this growing confidence?

Almost every survey conducted after and before the general elections showed that the increased confidence towards the Turkish government is a result of outstanding economic performance of the government, in terms of increased economic growth and declining inflation rate.

Turks are more likely today than in the past to say that religious leaders are having a positive impact (61% up from 32% in 2002). Nonetheless, an overwhelming majority (85%) says the same about the Turkish military, a secular institution, which has had tense relations with Islamist politicians. What role does the Turkish public want the military to play in their democracy?

One of our surveys showed that more than 60 percent of Turkish citizens approve the active role of religious leaders in political life. This score almost doubles the average of the European countries, according to the European Values Survey.

Contrary to the above stated findings, we don't have any evidence to show increased support for an active political role [by] religious leaders [...]. Therefore we have to be careful in accepting this score as an indicator of changing climate.

The role given to the Turkish military is not easy to understand from a Western point of view. [It is] different from the Western political culture, where the military is clearly under the control of the civilian authority. The Turkish military has a specific role in political life. This role stems from the Praetorian [Guard] "founder" characteristics of the military and frequent military interventions in the 1960s and 1970s.

For the secularist majority of the country—despite 47 percent electoral support, the majority of the voters are still supporters of secularist values—there are still threats against secular rule. However, those perceiving the military as the sole guardian of the secular system are not in the majority.